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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MATABELELAND: FOOD ACCESS REMAINS TENUOUS

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Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER KIMBERLY JEMISON FOR REASONS 1.5 B AND
[1D](#).

[11](#). SUMMARY: (U) Ambassador, USAID Officer, State Zimbabwe Desk Officer and Political Officer visited Matabeleland North province December 3 to December 6 to meet with people affected by the food and HIV/AIDS crises. Food issues dominated discussions as scarcities intensified across the country. The food situation remains tenuous, although there are signs the situation may improve in the next few weeks, in Binga. Recent steps by the GOZ to allow WFP to mill biotechnology derived corn at two mills in Zimbabwe and to accredit additional NGOs to distribute food will help throughout the country, but the half-full WFP pipeline and delays caused by slow GOZ decisions will offset the positive effect.

FOOD ACCESS TENUOUS

[12](#). (U) Ambassador, USAID Officer, State Zimbabwe Desk Officer and Political Officer visited Matabeleland North province December 3 to December 6 to meet with beneficiaries, NGO, UN, private sector and GOZ representatives. The primary concern of the people we met was the food crisis.

[13](#). (U) On 3 December, the group visited National Foods' Bulawayo mill, a major milling company hired by the World Food Program (WFP) to mill biotechnology derived (BT) corn, in Bulawayo to learn about the challenges facing the milling industry. (NOTE: National Foods was at that point the sole company permitted to mill BT corn. National Foods milled all the imported corn for the country during the 1992 drought. END NOTE.) At the time of our meeting, National Foods had just received a fax from the GOZ stating that the Government would not allow additional imports of BT corn into the country. (NOTE: Poloff and Deskoff learned in a 9 December meeting with WFP country director that the GOZ had since agreed to allow the National Foods mill in Bulawayo to continue milling and its mill in Gweru to also grind BT corn. See Reftel. The daily milling capacity of National Foods, other mills are: Harare 800 MT, Gweru 220 MT, Masvingo 120 MT, Mutare 170 MT. END NOTE.)

[14](#). (U) National Foods was completing its second contract to mill 13000 MT of corn, which takes approximately one month. The mill in Bulawayo has a maximum capacity of 450 MT per day of which a minimum of 95 percent is final product corn meal. Under normal circumstances, the by-product would be used as animal feed, but the GOZ has forbidden this because of concerns about beef exports to the EU and had ordered the by-products burned. National Foods has appealed to WFP to lobby the GOZ to allow National Foods to sell the by-products to feed producers. In a separate meeting with us, the WFP country director seemed amenable to the idea even proposed shipping the by-products to South Africa.

THIN FOOD COVERAGE IN MATOBO DISTRICT

[15](#). (U) We saw a general food distribution in Manyane ward, Matobo district, Matabeleland South. WFP through its implementing partner, World Vision (WV), has been feeding people in Matobo since April 2002. World Vision is providing food to 50 percent of the people in Manyane ward, which has a total population of 5025 people. During our visit, beneficiaries learned that their rations would be reduced from 12 kg to 5 kg of corn per person per month due to a gap in the food pipeline. The beneficiaries also received 800 ml of oil per household (a household comprising five people). The recommended food basket provides 2100 calories per day and includes 12 kg corn, 1 kg beans, and 600 ml vegetable oil per person per month. (COMMENT: The beneficiaries were surprisingly calm when informed of the reduced rations. When the chief said &A half a loaf of bread(8 the villagers replied, &(is better than no bread.8 END COMMENT.)

[16](#). (U) In addition to Manyane, WV is feeding people in the other 18 communal wards in Matobo. The Matobo district population is approximately 111,000 people and WV is feeding

40-50 percent feeding coverage. In April, WV was feeding 70-75 percent of the population in just 5 wards, so more residents in this district are now being fed.

CHURCH CANNOT IMPORT FOOD

17. (U) On December 3, Ambassador, DeskOff and PolOff met in Bulawayo with Anglican Bishop Wilson Sitshebo who told us the Anglican Church has been trying, unsuccessfully, to import corn. Bishop Sitshebo told us the Church had applied for and received the necessary import permits, met with Agriculture Minister Joseph Made, and sourced the corn in South Africa, only to have Made change his mind and revoke the import permit.

NGOS CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC

18. (U) In addition to the Matabeleland North meetings reported below, Poloff and Deskoff met with the Harare-based directors of WFP, World Vision, and GOAL to discuss the food situation. World Vision and GOAL are WFP implementing partners with GOAL recently approved. WV also has bilateral programs separate from the WFP effort.

--WORLD VISION--

19. (U) In a December 2 meeting with World Vision, country Director Rudo Kwaramba said she had just returned from Mashonaland East, where she had found the province in very bad shape. She said this is unusual and hypothesized that the policymakers do not know what is going on, or are refusing to admit there is a problem. Kwaramba said people were just happy to get vegetables and tea.

110. (U) When asked about recent allegations of politicization, Kwaramba explained WV's beneficiary selection process and their 10 percent random sampling of registered beneficiaries. She also told us WV had contracted Deloitte and Touche to set up a monitoring system independent from the United Nations, International Verification Unit (IVU) whereby staff members and other stakeholders could report misconduct, or behavior contrary to the aims of the program, via a hotline.

111. (U) Kwaramba expressed concern about future food supplies through its bilateral program because of the BT issue. She also said the fuel crisis will affect distributions. Kwaramba cited one incident where a WV driver was denied fuel because he did not have a ZANU-PF card.

--WORLD FOOD PROGRAM--

112. (U) On December 9, Poloff and Deskoff met with WFP Director Kevin Farrell. Farrell told us he had noticed an increased willingness within the GOZ over the last month to engage on the food side. The GOZ had just told him to forget about the 17500 MT corn swap and bring in the corn and mill it with other donor funds. Farrell attributed the positive shift on milling more to Social Welfare Minister July Moyo's trip to South Africa to assess that country's milling capacity than to donor pleas to allow BT food in. In spite of this relaxation on in-country milling, the NGO registration process is still a mystery, and some NGOs are still awaiting clearance (Mercy Corps, World Relief). Farrell said WFP would concentrate on the existing twelve implementing partners and not direct resources to the NGOs awaiting clearance.

113. (U) Farrell said some of the donor community's advocates in the GOZ's civil service could not be counted on anymore because of increased apathy among the cadre. Lack of a living wage and fear of lay-offs or demotions have dulled the initiative of some civil servants. Farrell cited an example of a biosafety board employee who was berated for arguing for the approval of BT corn.

114. (U) When asked about politicization of food aid, Farrell said the level of interference by the GOZ was no worse than what has occurred in many other countries. He stated that the GOZ has never tried to prioritize districts along political lines. Farrell said the frequency of problems with the GOZ depends upon the implementing partners' food aid experience in general as well as their experience in Zimbabwe. He admitted that political problems were hindering deliveries in Mberengwa, Gwanda, Zaka and some of Christian Care's Mashonaland locations.

--GOAL--

115. (U) Paul Brandrop, country prospects for GOAL, an Irish NGO, seemed more optimistic than the WFP and WV directors about prospects for successfully delivering enough food to their beneficiaries. GOAL is responsible for Makoni and Hurungwe districts. GOAL was still in the registration process when Poloff and Deskoff met with Brandrop on December 19. Brandrop told us local government leaders have been very helpful, and the provincial governors of Manicaland and Mashonaland West even gave GOAL their cell phone numbers with instructions to call if there are any problems. (NOTE: A few weeks ago the governor of Manicaland, Oppah Muchinguri,

accused senior ZANU-PF officials of corruption in food distribution. END NOTE) Brandrop told us a ZANU-PF District Administrator made an announcement at one of the community meetings that precedes registration reiterating that no politics were to be involved in distributions. He also said that neither the police nor the ZANU-PF youth has been a problem.

16. (U) GOAL plans to begin distributions by December 25 but admits there are pipeline problems. The objective is to distribute 4500 MT of food per month. GOAL has also applied to Irish Aid for more of the corn-soy blend (CSB) used in school feedings in an effort to maintain school attendance, particularly of girls. GOAL has suggested to the GMB that they cover people who have assets and those living in wards uncovered by international food assistance. Brandrop said his GMB contacts seem willing to work with donors but they probably have very little influence.

ISOLATED INCIDENTS OF POLITICIZATION

17. (U) To avoid or minimize the temptation to politicize food distributions, WV suspended distributions in Matobo during the September rural district council elections. WV has tried to implement a system that minimizes opportunities for abuse. Village heads select people to be placed on a beneficiary list after going over the selection criteria with the community. WV then verifies the list by taking a random sample of the people on the list and performing spot checks.

18. (U) Anglican Bishop Sitshebo said people were still selectively receiving food in Insiza and that the officials were toeing the ZANU-PF party line and only giving GMB food upon presentation of a ZANU-PF party card. (NOTE: At that point distribution of WFP food had not resumed. END NOTE.) The Bishop also told us that in Gwelutshena in Nkayi district, people from neighboring Midlands province had to present a ZANU-PF card even before they were allowed to queue for corn, or else they could be beaten up. The Bishop also said the green bombers, the euphemism given members of the youth militia, were known to be directing corn deliveries in Gweru in Midlands province.

19. (U) On 4 December, the group met with MDC Bulawayo Executive Mayor J.Ndabeni-Ncube. Ncube said that the former ministers, such as the former education minister, were the worst ones in terms of politicizing GMB food deliveries in the Bulawayo area. Ncube claimed that the Former Education Minister has tons of food at his house and a sign over his door that reads &No ZANU-PF card. No food.8 He also claimed that Vice President Msika has a store in Bulawayo where they bar MDC members from buying food.

BINGA: ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

20. (U) After local authorities blocked food aid deliveries to Binga for several months, this district is primed to become one of the better-served districts. According to Member of Parliament for Binga, Joel Gabuzza, people were eating caterpillars and sour fruit mixed with ash to stay alive. Gabuzza also said people had money but there was nothing to buy except beer, soft drinks, and Mazoe (a sweet, concentrated fruit-flavored beverage that is mixed with water).

21. (U) During a December 5 meeting with representatives from Save the Children-UK (SCF) and Catholic Development Commission (CADEC), we learned that, although the situation has been dire in Binga, the two NGOs are well positioned to feed the entire population. SCF is poised to feed 124,000 people in Binga district (the entire population) and 6000 social welfare cases (elderly, disabled, sick, child-headed households) in Kariba in Mashonaland West between mid-December and the end of April. SCF has been feeding 30,000 social welfare cases in Binga since November. SCF sourced food from South Africa in May and June and has had its suppliers holding the food since the GOZ suspended aid distributions in the district for the second time in October. The monthly food basket for each person includes 10 kg of corn meal, 2 kg of sugar beans, and 375 ml of vegetable oil.

22. (U) CADEC has been administering a child supplementary feeding program in Binga for two years. They feed 63,000 children between the ages of 6 months and 12 years and 2000 pregnant women at more than 680 feeding points. CADEC would like to extend school feeding to secondary school students but needs to find sufficient resources to support the project. CADEC food supplies are threatened because they come from Makonde Industries in Harare, which is importing inputs for the fortified porridge. CADEC plans to continue feeding through May. When asked how they ensure that the children are eating the porridge at school and not taking it all home (as we saw in a Sinakoma village in Binga), and the CADEC representatives replied that they have not monitored

consumption since their monitors were dismissed by the GOZ from school feeding areas because the government thought them to be political pawns. The CADEC representatives indicated that they would try to have teachers act as monitors.

123. (U) A major concern for both NGOs is the fuel shortage and the lack of spare parts. Both SCF and CADEC obtain fuel through CALTEX but may look into getting it from South Africa. According to the NGOs, CARE is already importing fuel directly from South Africa, although CARE has not confirmed this. The issue of spare parts may become an issue too. SCF already has had to cancel a distribution because three of the organization's trucks broke down.

124. (U) During our visit to Binga, we met with local Chief Sinansengwe and several of his headmen, where we learned local government leaders, Minister for Special Affairs John Nkomo, and Governor Obert Mpofu of Matabeleland North had met on December 5 to discuss the issue of relief aid in the district. (NOTE: We suspected a high-level meeting was happening in Binga after we saw Minister Nkomo leaving our hotel in Hwange early in the morning on December 5. END NOTE.) The Chief told us corruption and inadequate aid distribution operations by local ZANU-PF officials and structures (food being diverted for personal gain, food smuggled to Zambia, erratic GMB deliveries) were largely to blame for the food problems in Binga. As a result of the meeting with Nkomo and Mpofu, all government assistance would henceforth be distributed directly to the Chiefs for final distribution within their respective areas--taking this function out of the hands of the established local ZANU-PF-dominated task force structure.

AIDS CASES ON THE RISE

125. (U) On December 4, Ambassador, USAID Officer, State Desk Officer, and Political Officer visited St. Luke's Mission Hospital in Kenaar in Lupane district to discuss health issues in general and HIV/AIDS in particular. The hospital staff comprised one German doctor, one young Zimbabwean doctor and several nuns who serve Lupane district in Matabeleland North and Gokwe district in Midlands. The health care providers we met seemed overwhelmed and exhausted by the health problems besieging the community. The German physician working at the hospital lamented the absence of HIV/AIDS test kits even though many of his patients wanted to be tested. He also said the clinic would begin a mother-to-child-transmission prevention program in January. When asked if the clinic had voluntary counseling and testing (VCT), the German doctor said VCT was good in theory but too complicated for rural areas because of a lack of counselors and lab technicians. Ethics aside, he said he would prefer to administer antiretroviral drugs to pregnant women without testing or counseling if it would save children from being born HIV-positive.

126. (U) The physician told us that 80 to 90 percent of his patients were HIV-positive and that there has been an increase in AIDS cases because of malnutrition. He also said that 80 percent of the pediatric ward was malnourished but that the clinic does not have enough high energy/protein foods to save all of the children.

127. (U) Although the St. Luke's visit focused specifically on HIV/AIDS, the disease came up in our other meetings as well. Bishop Sitshabo told us the Anglican Church is working with Deseret International to promote behavior change. He commented that stigma was still a big problem. Joel Gabuzza, the MP for Binga, said that the HIV/AIDS situation is grave and pointed out that tuberculosis (TB) cases have increased so much that entire hospital wings are devoted to the disease, whereas a few years ago only one or two beds would house TB cases. Save the Children has several HIV/AIDS programs concentrating on community support groups, youth/peer groups, and the elderly in Binga.

COMMENT

128. (C) The information we gleaned from Matabeleland North reinforced what we had read and heard about in the press. Unlike the rest of the country, land redistribution did not seem to be the concern for most of our interlocutors, most likely because the lands are poor. The high HIV/AIDS levels and severe food shortages were the most pressing concerns.

129. (C) The food security situation has deteriorated among the entire population because of decreasing purchasing power and unavailability of food. The recent resumption of food aid distributions in Binga by SCF, which has its own food pipeline apart from WFP, should result in gradual improvement in the district. Elsewhere in Matabeleland South and North, if the food pipeline is not bolstered soon, many residents could starve to death. During our visit, implementing partners had to reduce rations because of a lack of food

availability. To compound matters, HIV/AIDS lurks in the background and as food for sex becomes more commonplace, safe sexual practices will be a distant second if the choice is food now or death later. The GOZ decision to permit continued and increased milling of maize within Zimbabwe will help, but the existing food pipeline is not full and running late due to earlier GOZ constraints.

130. (C) Whether the food situation in Bulawayo will improve is unclear. The city of Bulawayo is better off than the rural areas, but the ZANU-PF led government has effectively shut out Mayor Ncube from food and drought relief discussions held by the Drought Task Force in spite of Ncube,s pleas to the governor to include himself and the city council in the process. Furthermore, NGOs traditionally have been reluctant to include urban areas among their beneficiary areas or in their assessments.

WHITEHEAD